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ABSTRACT

Unemployment can be studied in regard to its relationship to the psychological health of unemployed persons. Although the relationship is generally perceived as negative, some people suffer fewer negative consequences of unemployment than others. Potentially negative aspects of unemployment include reduced income, life restrictions, fewer goals, smaller scope for decision making, diminished opportunity to develop and use skills, an increase in psychologically threatening activities, insecurity about the future, restricted range of interpersonal contact, and changes in social position. Factors influencing the impact of unemployment include employment commitment, age, length of unemployment, social class, and sex differences. In addition, some jobs have "bad" components that make some workers better off unemployed--so-called "good" unemployment. Since unemployment is likely to be high in the future, some people may have to reconstruct their perceptions of unemployment to move into "good" unemployment, overcoming some of the negative features of unemployment by attitude change. Job restructuring such as part-time work and job sharing also may help to mitigate the impact of unemployment, but will require attitude change. (KC)

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Work, Jobs and Unemployment

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PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH depends upon the nature of the work which a person undertakes. In addition to workers in paid jobs, mothers work in their domestic roles, volunteers in community projects are working, members of an amateur football team or a choir work during practice and in public performance, and a person works in the garden or in decorating the kitchen.

Work can be beneficial even when it is not enjoyable. Conversely, of course, work can also be harmful. We need to learn which aspects and types of work enhance psychological well-being and which impair well-being. Such an approach does not deny the significance of leisure, the opportunity *not* to work. Leisure is valuable in its own right, and also because contrasts between work and leisure sharpen the value of each.

Psychological aspects of unemployment

RATES OF UNEMPLOYMENT in most developed countries are at a very high level, and average values are greatly exceeded in certain geographical areas and among certain groups (ethnic minorities and disabled people, for example). Furthermore, long periods of unemployment are becoming common; more than a million people in the United Kingdom have been out of work for more than a year. One still hears wild talk about unemployment being attractive to most unemployed people, or (at the other extreme) that unemployment is driving tens of thousands of people to an early grave. In this area we clearly need more facts.

Which aspects of being unemployed particularly impair psychological well-being, and what personal attributes or social processes permit high levels of well-being in the absence of paid work?

My first attempt to answer questions of that kind was a follow-up of steel-workers who had lost their jobs after closure of their plant in 1976. I developed and applied interview measures of anxiety, life satisfaction, and positive and negative affect, showing that those who were still unemployed six months after closure exhibited significantly lower psychological well-being than those who had obtained new jobs. My colleagues and I have since obtained similar findings from a number of other investigations. Without doubt the psychological health of unemployed people is on average significantly below that of people in jobs. And we are confident from longitudinal evidence that their poorer psychological health is not usually a reflection of the fact that unemployed people have always had poorer health: being without a job does indeed cause the decline, and a return to paid employment sharply increases psychological well-being.

In one recent study of almost 1000 unemployed men, a fifth of the sample reported psychological deterioration since losing their job. Among the changes they described were increased anxiety, depression, insomnia, irritability, lack of confidence, listlessness, inability to concentrate, and general nervousness. The vast majority of people reporting such changes for the worse indicated that these were directly associated with their being unemployed. However, it was interesting to find that 8 percent reported an *improvement* in psychological health. In almost all cases this was described as coming about because people were now free from the stresses of their paid jobs. A small minority of people may thus in certain respects benefit from becoming unemployed.

Potentially negative features of unemployment

LET US CONSIDER next *why* becoming unemployed might yield this deterioration. Nine features of the unemployed person's role may bring about reduced psychological well-being.

First, it is clear that unemployment is likely to yield a reduced income. For example, our studies of unemployed working-class men suggest that about two-thirds of them now have a household income which is half or less of their income when employed. We also find repeatedly that financial anxiety is high, and that worries about money strongly predict unemployed people's overall distress.

Second, without paid employment the variety within a person's life is likely to be relatively restricted. This is partly a question of being required less often to leave the house when you are unemployed, and is also a function of reduced in-

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come: you cannot afford to go to the cinema, the club, or the football match as often as you could when you had a paid job. Not surprisingly we found that unemployed men take on significantly more child-care activities and meal preparation, but there is also more inactivity, merely sitting around, sleeping during the day and watching television.

A related feature of unemployment is that in comparison with paid work it introduces fewer goals and less 'traction'. Many forms of activity are made up of interrelated sets of tasks and goals. Committing yourself to a certain goal also commits you to other goals and tasks; you become drawn along by the structure of your work. I think it is often the case that employment introduces more traction in this sense than is present when one is without a paid job.

A fourth potentially negative feature of unemployment is a smaller scope for decision making. In one sense of course an unemployed person has a great deal of freedom: he or she can decide when to get up, whether or not to go out, whether or not to watch television, and so on. But this freedom of choice is in most cases limited to small repetitive decisions about daily routine. In respect of larger decisions, for example about life-style or leisure activities, the range of realistic options available to an unemployed person is usually quite small, since material resources are severely curtailed.

Fifth, there is considerable evidence that much of the satisfaction derived from jobs comes from the development and practice of skills. Not all jobs offer opportunities of that kind, but for most people unemployment is likely to bring a reduction in skill use and development. In one sense, of course, unemployed people have *more* opportunities to practice their skills, just as in one sense they have greater decision latitude. However, in practice diminished resources and a reduction in externally imposed goals are likely for most people to lead to more limited skill use or development during unemployment.

A sixth feature is an increase in psychologically threatening activities. Unemployed people are committed to seeking jobs where they will probably be rejected, they have to deal with a society which often appears to view them as second-class citizens, and they may have to struggle to raise money through official agencies or through borrowing and selling. In general they are liable to experience a large number of threatening life-events.

Associated with this is a seventh aspect of unemployment insecurity about the future. In one of our studies of unemployed working-class men, approximately two-thirds identified as a major problem not knowing what was going to happen to them in future months. A high proportion felt threatened by the possibility that they might become unemployable, lose their self-respect, or have insoluble money problems. Current threats are thus compounded by a sense of insecurity about the future.

An eighth feature of unemployment is restricted interpersonal contact. It is widely believed that unemployed people have less contact with other people because of the absence of job colleagues and because of their reduced money to visit clubs, pubs or other social settings. However, in our own studies unemployed men have reported *more* time spent with friends and neighbours since they became unemployed. That clearly needs to be followed up. It seems likely that unemployed men may spend more time with a *restricted range* of other people, so that the number of *different* contacts is reduced although the overall amount of contact is, if anything, increased.

Ninth, we must consider the changes in social position which accompany unemployment. There is no doubt that many social positions within paid employment can strongly influence self-concept and the way a person is categorised and evaluated by others. On becoming unemployed a person loses a socially accepted position and the roles and self-perceptions which go with it. And the newly acquired position is widely felt to be inferior. Unemployed people tend to feel that they have moved into a position of lower prestige, and they may sense that their aspirations ought to be reduced in keeping with this apparently subordinate position.

Factors influencing the impact of unemployment

WHAT MIGHT MEDIATE the effects of being unemployed? First, employment commitment. Most unemployed people are locked into a strong commitment to obtain another job. Contrary to some popular opinion, they really do want a job. But with higher employment commitments goes higher distress.

This fact is not very surprising. And it raises social questions. What personal and social factors are likely to give rise to high or low levels of employment commitment? Can, and should, high levels of commitment be reduced, through counselling, teaching or social pressures, when unemployment is so high that the probability of finding a job is negligible? We are here at the heart of the social construction of unemployment, and the strong values which determine it.

Second, age. It is clear that middle-aged unemployed men experience greater distress than those who are younger or older. In part this is associated with greater financial strain among the middle-aged group, who often have more demanding family commitments.

Third, many studies have examined length of unemployment. It appears that psychological health drops at the point of transition. Even for those who have just become unemployed, distress scores are significantly above those in paid jobs. Well-being continues to decline through the early weeks of unemployment, but it seems that there is a levelling off around four to six months.

There is research evidence that longer unemployment is *not* associated with greater distress for people who are at both extremes of the age distribution of the work-force. Unemployed people over 60 years of age are increasingly see ing themselves as 'taking early retirement'. And unemployed people below the age of about 20 are different from middle-aged unemployed people in several respects. Teenagers who are unemployed tend to have fewer financial problems than older unemployed people, for instance because they may be living reasonably cheaply with their parents. They carry forward from school a network of friends and leisure activities, and the social stigma of unemployment may be less for them than for unemployed middle-aged people.

Fourth, social class. We have recently compared matched groups of middle-class and working-class unemployed people, examining their experiences of unemployment and several aspects of well-being. We found substantially greater financial problems among the working-class, and also that they had greater difficulty in filling the time than did middle-class unemployed people. This difference in activity level is partly a function of their having less money to spend, but there are suggestions in the data that the difference is also a matter of greater internal control and self-directedness among the middle-class.

Finally, what about sex differences in the effect of unemployment? In general we have learned that for single women or others who are principal wage-earners the patterns of effects is the same as for men. But for mothers of young children there is apparently no general association between having a job and experiencing higher psychological well-being. Neither does there appear to be an association between paid employment and well-being for mothers in general, defined as a group, irrespective of the age of their children.

Paid employment appears to yield more psychological benefit for working-class mothers than for the middle-class. I think that this last finding is contrary to some people's belief. However, the daily lives of mothers without paid work tend to be more stressful and psychologically impoverished in working-class than in middle-class homes, so that there may be more scope for a gain associated with having a job.

Differences between jobs

IN ADDITION TO RESEARCH into unemployment, the Social and Applied Psychology Unit at Sheffield University is also carrying out parallel studies within a second design: we are investigating people, all of whom are in paid employment, in order to identify those features of their jobs which enhance or diminish psychological well-being. I believe that the factors we are identifying as psychologically important in paid work turn out to be the ones which also determine the impact of unemployment.

Some of our investigations are aiming to identify and change occupational environments which are psychologically undesirable. We carry out controlled experiments to change the content of jobs, in a direction which we predict will increase employee well-being. These experiments continue for up to three years, and we carefully monitor the consequences of the changes. For example, one study set out to examine the consequences of increasing the control which lower-level production employees have over their work tasks and interrelationships. This involved redesigning jobs, so that responsibilities were shifted from supervisors to teams of shop floor workers. The workers were given control over setting the pace of work, the distribution of tasks between themselves, and the general organisation of their time and effort.

These changes were based upon a model of psychological well-being in paid work, which emphasises the importance of decision latitude and personal control over resources. The experimental changes increased the scope of workers' decision making, and also introduced wider opportunities for skill use, more work variety, and more constructive interpersonal contacts. Data about employee attitudes, well-being and performance were gathered before the changes and six and 18 months later. It was found that employee well-being increased substantially as a result of the experimental changes: overall job satisfaction became significantly greater and psychological distress significantly declined. The changes were also apparent within the factory, where the atmosphere had become more relaxed with less conflict and less strain as people went about their jobs.

I have derived from these and other studies, a perspective on which features of paid work are psychologically 'good' and which are psychologically 'bad'. This is shown in Table 1, with the two extremes of what is in fact a continuum. I believe that it is generally the case that psychological well-being is enhanced by jobs which are defined as 'good' in terms of the nine characteristics set out there. I also believed that far too many jobs fall into the category of psychologically 'bad' in respect of these features. Of course many of the features are desirable only up to a point: for example, most people want interpersonal contact, but to a degree they consider reasonable rather than excessive. And some psychological threat is inherent in the development of skills and the pursuit of challenging goals. To determine the optimum level of these variables is of course one of the tasks of occupational research.

Table 1

Characteristics of psychologically 'good' and psychologically 'bad' jobs

	'Good' jobs have	'Bad' jobs' have
1. Money	more	less
2. Variety	more	less
3. Goals, traction	more	less
4. Decision latitude	more	less
5. Skill use/development	more	less
6. Psychological threat	less	more
7. Security	more	less
8. Interpersonal contact	more	less
9. Valued social position	more	less

Good and bad unemployment

UNEMPLOYMENT MAY be construed in the same way, as is shown in Table 2. For most people, unemployment is characterised by the right-hand column; it is that pattern of features which leads to declining psychological health.

It may seem strange to talk of 'good' unemployment, when so much evidence points to its harmful effects. But unemployment is harmful through these nine processes and in part through the way it is socially constructed; the present negative consequences are not necessarily entailed by the condition of unemployment itself. I have also pointed out that a small number of people appear not to suffer when they are unemployed, and that a very small minority exhibit an improvement, especially if their previous job was in the 'bad' category. This is possible because they move into circumstances of relatively 'good' unemployment in these nine terms.

Table 2
Characteristics of psychologically 'good' and psychologically 'bad' unemployment

	'Good' unemployment has	'Bad' unemployment has
1. Money	more	less
2. Variety	more	less
3. Goals, traction	more	less
4. Decision latitude	more	less
5. Skill use/development	more	less
6. Psychological threat	less	more
7. Security	more	less
8. Interpersonal contact	more	less
9. Valued social position	more	less

Unemployed people can sometimes change their own unemployment from being psychologically 'bad' towards the 'good' pole of the continuum. Let me illustrate that through one final study from the Unit. This involved interviews with a small sample of people who had been specially identified as coping particularly well with unemployment. Each member of the sample was found to maintain a very high level of activity, which was channelled by strongly held values towards the achievement of particular goals, usually in the domain of religious, political or community groups. These unemployed people drew a clear distinction between work in general, to which they were strongly committed, and paid employment, to which they were less committed. They were very *pro-active* tending to create and then exploit opportunities; and they were self-directed to a high degree, being able to structure their own activities in line with their objectives and their commitment to specific tasks.

However, such active, self-directing people are relatively unusual. I am certainly not suggesting that all unemployed people could transform their situation in this way. Despite that, some self-engendered movement from 'bad' towards 'good' unemployment is in principle often possible.

The reconstruction of unemployment

WHATEVER GOVERNMENT is in power, rates of unemployment in the next decade are likely to be much higher than those which were customary only 10 years ago. Large structural changes have taken place in industry and other employment sectors. And whatever the long-term effects of new technology, the introduction of micro-processor-based equipment is bound to reduce job opportunities in the short term. Furthermore the size of the labour force has increased in recent years.

As nations we clearly need more jobs. But as psychologists and educationalists I think we should go beyond that, to argue particularly for jobs which enhance rather than impair psychological health. There are a lot of 'bad' jobs around. So the top priority is to move people out of 'bad' employment into 'good' jobs, defining these in terms I have used here.

However, I believe that the most optimistic predictions of any political party indicate that there will still not be enough jobs to go around, at least as long as a job is expected to fill 35 or 40 hours of each week. Too many people will be unemployed whatever happens politically or economically. This is where the concept of 'good' unemployment is so important; as I have argued, it is possible for psychological well-being to be high during unemployment, although for most unemployed people at present that is not the case. As well as aiming for more jobs, we need also to change values and behaviour so that unemployment comes closer to 'good' unemployment as I have identified it in Table 2. This is partly an individual matter, arising from the self-directedness of individual unemployed people, but it is primarily a matter for society in general. We need structural changes and new social processes which can enhance the psychological health of unemployed people.

Novel ideas are starting to gain ground: job sharing during a week or in alternate weeks, having a paid job for only a limited number of months in each year, undertaking work for voluntary agencies, helping community groups, attending short-term or part-time educational courses, or having access to free recreational facilities. But there is need for more intensive effort, and that must start with the recognition that unemployment is likely to remain high whatever happens politically and economically. At present too many people and groups are assuming that unemployment can be eradicated. It certainly could (and should) be reduced, but I believe that the level will nevertheless remain higher than is desirable. We clearly need more jobs, but what is also needed is the 'social reconstruction' of unemployment.

Notes:

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This is an abbreviated version of a paper presented to the British Psychological Society on receiving the Presidents' Award, April 1983. The theme has been developed and substantiated in

Warr, P.B. (1987) *Work, Unemployment, and Health*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

And in

D.B. Warr (ed.) (1987) *Psychology at Work* (3rd. edn.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

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